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DEPT FOR DS/IP/AF
DEPT FOR DS/TIA/ITA
DEPT FOR AF/E

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/04/2019

TAGS: ASEC MA PTER

SUBJECT: SECURITY FORCES EMBOLDENED WITH NEW EQUIPMENT

Classified By: A/RSO Timothy Feeney for reasons 1.4 d and e

¶1. (C/NF) Summary: President Ravalomanana's recent push to outfit his security forces with non-lethal weapons may run the risk of alienating the population's perception that the security forces remain neutral between the President and Andry "TGV" Rajoelina's opposition movement. End Summary.

¶2. (C/NF) Recognizing that his security forces lacked proper riot control gear, the President has embarked on a buying spree of riot control gear from suppliers in China, using South Africa as a transit point. On at least two separate occasions, confirmed by RSO airport police contacts, the President has utilized his company's privately owned aircraft, a ATR 42-320 registration #5R-MJT and affectionately named TIKO Air, to fly to South Africa to pickup much needed riot control gear (shields, body armor, tear gas, rubber bullets, and uniforms) for his security forces. Bypassing the cumbersome customs bureaucracy, the aircraft arrives at Ivato International's military section where it is unloaded and hauled off by military trucks for their immediate deployment to the security forces making up the EMMO-Nat (Etat-Major Mixte Operationnel au Niveau National) units. Comment: EMMO-Nat forces are made up of Malagasy military elements, Gendarmerie, and National Police operating under a mixed command and used as a quick reaction force. End Comment.

¶3. (C/NF) Feeling the need to get a return on his investment, the deployment of this gear has resulted in the President pressuring EMMO-Nat commanders, who are usually hesitant to initiate confrontation, to directly confront opposition protesters and disperse any large gatherings with tear gas and stun grenades. On February 27th, security forces made a half hearted effort to disperse opposition protesters at Antananarivo's main sports stadium but quickly retreated to a nearby police station as protesters began pelting security forces with stones. Malagasy media outlets have widely reported on the arrival of this new equipment and the equipment's point of origin with rumors swirling that offensive weapons have been added to the shipments. Not wanting to be complicit in supplying offensive weapons and accused of being indirectly responsible for the killing of civilians, the Chinese Embassy issued a press release denying the delivery of arms and ammunition but surprisingly admitting to the delivery of helmets, shields, uniforms, and body armor.

¶4. (C/NF) Civilian deaths and injuries by the security forces are quickly bringing the public's attention to their role in the political deadlock. During the February 27th confrontation, security forces used stun grenades in an attempt to intimidate and disperse the crowd. After the opposition rally was over, 75-100 concerned citizens gathered outside the Gendarmerie National Headquarters (located 2 kilometers from the rally) with an unexploded grenade, protesting its use and asking why security forces used the grenade on the population. The group of citizens recognized that the grenade was not a lethal explosive grenade, but still believed the stun grenades use against the population was unacceptable. On February 28th, a rally in Fianarantsoa resulted in the death of a guard not participating in the opposition demonstration after a stray bullet killed him.

Again the local population blamed the security forces for the death after they deployed tear gas and fired warning shots into the air. Finally on March 2nd, a confrontation between university students and security forces resulted in the death of one person. Reports indicate security forces arrived on scene and attempted to clear a blockade on the road resulting in an immediate clash with the students. Without delay security forces deployed tear gas and warning shots resulting in one person suffering a fatal head shot and two others wounded. Witnesses state the security forces fired into the crowd while the government claims the individual was hit by a stray round that was originally fired into the sky. The Malagasy Red Cross confirmed the one death but later retracted the confirmation. Contacts at Antananarivo's main hospital confirmed receiving two individuals with gunshot wounds.

15. (C/NF) Comment: The arrival of the riot gear was a much needed addition to the inventory of non-lethal weapons for the security forces. However, the security forces have not received proper training on the use of this equipment for its intended purpose. It is doubtful the security forces properly understand how to effectively use rubber bullets in a crowd control situation. Ill trained units would no doubt continue to fire their weapons towards the upper body portion of crowds increasing the risk of head shots with lethal consequences. Additionally, even with the best intentions of keeping the rubber bullets low to the ground, the risk of security forces firing their weapons on full automatic and causing the weapon's barrel to naturally climb up with the resulting rounds traveling towards the upper body of crowds is a real concern. Additionally, the deployment of stun grenades into dense crowds can cause burns and the quality of Chinese produced grenades is suspect at best. Finally, riot control forces have shown a habit of letting crowds immediately proceed up to their riot line with no sense of urgency to maintain a large 'no mans land' between security forces and protesters. This action makes it impossible for the riot control units to deploy tear gas to disperse a large crowd and reduce the risk of injuries against their own personnel.

16. (C/NF) Comment continued: If the current trend continues with protesters or bystanders being killed or seriously injured by the use of this new equipment, the population's perception that the security forces are playing referee and only maintaining law and order in this political stand off will be tested along with the population's general respect for the military and police. Additionally, public opinion will shift against the President adding new life to TGV's movement with the possibility of the opposition viewing the security forces as legitimate targets, firmly under the command of the President. Finally, the manner in which the President continues to mix his own business assets with state resources through the use of his TIKO plane to deliver equipment for the security forces only reinforces TGV's argument that the President truly considers himself CEO of Madagascar.

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